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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 003711

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/24/2014

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SUBJECT: VENEZUELA'S NEW FOREIGN MINISTER: ALI RODRIGUEZ
ARAQUE

REF: CARACAS 3638

Classified By: Abelardo A. Arias, Political Counselor,
for Reasons 1.4(b).

Summary

1. (U) Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez swore in Ali Rodriguez Araque as Foreign Minister on November 21, replacing outgoing Minister Jesus Perez. Rodriguez was most recently president of the state-run oil company PDVSA. Rodriguez, who served one year as the Secretary General of OPEC, was a congressman for the Causa Radical party and later for the pro-Chavez Patria Para Todos (PPT). During the 60's and 70's, Rodriguez was a communist guerrilla fighter. Rodriguez has commented that he will conduct a "multi-polar" foreign policy, fight terrorism, and promote Latin American integration. End summary.

Chavez Names Fifth Foreign Minister in Six Years

2. (U) Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez swore in Ali Rodriguez Araque as Foreign Minister on November 21. Chavez's fifth foreign minister since he took office in 1998, Rodriguez's focus has been energy. He was most recently president of the state-run oil company PDVSA, a position he had held since July 2002 (ref). From January 2001 to June 2002, Rodriguez was Secretary General of OPEC. He was Chavez's first Minister of Energy and Mines between February 1999 and January 2001. Before joining the executive branch, Rodriguez served as a congressman representing Bolivar State between 1983 and 1999 and served briefly as a senator in 1999 before the Senate was abolished by the new constitution. He was elected on the tickets of leftist parties, including Causa R and Patria Para Todos (PPT), a Causa R offshoot created in 1997 that later joined in political alliance with Chavez.

3. (U) During his tenure in the Chamber of Deputies, Rodriguez served as the president of the Energy and Mines Committee. He also served on the Latin American Parliament's Energy and Mines Commission. Rodriguez opposed the opening of PDVSA to foreign investors, authoring a book in 1997 challenging the legalities of PDVSA's privatization process. As Energy Minister and OPEC Secretary General, Rodriguez pressed for Venezuela's strict adherence to OPEC quotas.

Better U.S. Relations, While Respecting Sovereignty

4. (U) Upon taking office as Foreign Minister, Rodriguez accompanied Chavez on a trip to Spain, Libya, and Iran. Rodriguez told reporters his objectives will be to fight terrorism, promote Latin American integration, and pursue Chavez's "multi-polar" vision of the world. On this last point, Rodriguez called for the "democratization" of international organizations such as the UN and OAS. On U.S.-Venezuela relations, Rodriguez acknowledged the long-standing oil relationship, called for respect for Venezuelan sovereignty, and promised to work to "reduce friction" between the two countries.

Personal Data

5. (U) Rodriguez was born on September 9, 1937 in Lara State, Venezuela. He received a law degree from Venezuelan Central University in Caracas in 1961. He also studied economics and energy issues at the University of the Andes in Merida State. Rodriguez was active in communist guerrilla organizations during the 60's and 70's. Before beginning his political career, Rodriguez worked as a lawyer specializing in labor law. He is reportedly married but separated. He does not speak English.

Comment

[16](#). (C) Rodriguez is a serious and responsible policy maker and will probably be an improvement over his bumbling predecessor, Jesus Perez. As PDVSA president, he maintained discreet contact with the Embassy. It is too soon to tell whether Rodriguez will continue the purge at the Foreign Ministry of diplomats who do not fully support the revolution, though we note it was Rodriguez in charge of PDVSA when 18,000 employees were fired for joining the 2002-2003 national strike. Rodriguez has been a senior adviser to Chavez since his election as president, though at times Chavez has expressed frustration with the independent-minded Rodriguez. Rodriguez is also rumored to have his own ties to Fidel Castro, a holdover from the former's guerrilla days.

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